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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001047

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/03/2008

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA - RECENT EVENTS IN ZIMBABWE UNDERMINE
LAST MONTH'S DIPLOMATIC EFFORTS BY PRESIDENT OBASANJO
AND MBEKI

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASONS:
1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The recent surge in political tension in Zimbabwe seems to have erased the progress President Obasanjo believed was achieved by his May visit to Harare. Obasanjo thought he and President Mbeki made headway moving the GOZ and MDC toward resuming their political negotiations. However, the crackdown against the MDC and the MDC's call for mass action have eclipsed last month's Obasanjo-Mbeki intervention. Curiously, the GON and other visiting African leaders reportedly gave President Mugabe the cold shoulder during his visit to Nigeria for President Obasanjo's May 29 inauguration. While we should not read too much into this apparent brush-off, it could signal a possible lessening of Nigeria's patience with the recalcitrant Zimbabwean. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) During a May 16 meeting with Ambassador Jeter, President Obasanjo stated that his visit to Zimbabwe earlier that month was partially successful in drawing the GOZ and MDC back to the negotiation table. Obasanjo recounted that he and Mbeki had made progress shuffling between meetings with Mugabe and Tsvangirai. In the first meeting with Mugabe, the Zimbabwean expressed willingness for his officials to resume talks with the MDC. However, Mugabe complained the MDC's claim that his election and subsequent inauguration were illegitimate was a major stumbling block. Eventually, the MDC had to talk to him directly or he would have to give his lieutenants instructions on how to represent him in talks with the MDC, Mugabe posited. There was no other way the process could move forward. Thus, it was a non sequitur for the MDC to characterize him as illegitimate since he was the essential cog in the machinery of the desired negotiations, Mugabe reasoned.

3. (C) Obasanjo said he relayed Mugabe's observation to Tsvangirai who, surprisingly, was accommodating. The MDC leader stated the MDC understood Mugabe was the de facto Head of State. However, the MDC's position was that Mugabe's election was occasioned by serious irregularities, that Mugabe should honestly acknowledge. The MDC could not simply concede victory when it was achieved through electoral fraud. The use of the term "illegitimate" was thus the MDC's rhetorical tool to galvanize its supporters and to remind the GOZ that redress and concessions were in order. However, Tsvangirai promised that the MDC would delete the word illegitimate from its vocabulary should Mugabe agree to talks.

4. (C) Obasanjo and Mbeki returned to Mugabe with the MDC position. Mugabe seemed pleased, but advanced another condition. This time, he insisted that the MDC should drop its court case. Mbeki and Obasanjo returned to Tsvangirai with Mugabe's request, and the MDC was partially accommodating. Tsvangirai stated that the court case was more a symbolic than a real threat to Mugabe. Given the pliancy of the Zimbabwean judiciary and the dilatory tools in the GOZ legal arsenal, Tsvangirai was not sanguine about a favorable or an early decision. Although the MDC leader insisted on the insuperability of the legal merits of his complaint, he also realized that the case could be bogged down in the courts well after Mugabe's term expired. While Tsvangirai did not agree to formally dismiss the case, he indicated the MDC would be willing to let the case recede into inactivity should the talks resume and progress be achieved.

5. (C) Obasanjo said he had to leave Zimbabwe before a third session could be arranged with Mugabe; however, Mbeki talked to Mugabe who did not reject the MDC idea

of informally letting the case run a long course. Yet, the Zimbabwean leader seemed to prefer a more formal and final disposition of the case.

16. (C) Also, Mbeki and Mugabe talked about possible inclusion of the MDC in a government of national unity. Mugabe signaled that he was not opposed to the idea but asserted the MDC had less than a handful of members competent enough for Ministerial or senior level appointments. Mbeki urged him to offer the MDC a chance to join as a junior partner in a government of national unity and to extend positions to these competent MDC representatives.

17. (C) Stating that a government of national unity was as far as Mugabe could go, Obasanjo recalled a conversation with a ZANU-PF leader who told him the party would not let Mugabe step down right now. The party was adamant that he should remain until the 2005 legislative elections. If he left now, the party could fragment because of leadership struggles; this would jeopardize ZANU's political future. Once the party's legislative base was reaffirmed in 2005, then Mugabe would become expendable, an increasingly negative factor as the country again approached its Presidential election.

18. (C) Comment: Obasanjo believed he had achieved headway in Zimbabwe; events in late May and early June seem to belie that contradiction. Confrontation and crackdown, with Mugabe in his accustomed role as prime culprit, have re-emerged as the dominant themes in Zimbabwe. This gives the joint Obasanjo-Mbeki initiative the appearance of a wasted effort. However, while Obasanjo put a positive spin on his visit, he probably was not as pleased as he wanted us to believe. The scenario he painted shows a Mugabe who seemed intent on making one demand after another in order to delay real negotiations.

19. (C) Mugabe's treatment in Nigeria during President Obasanjo's inaugural ceremonies are telling. The news circulating among Nigerian officials was that Mugabe was asked to stay home. However, Mugabe insisted on attending. That may have been a mistake. According to the Canadian Deputy High Commission who said his information came from a very reliable source, no other Head of State would sit with Mugabe on the bus ride to the actual inaugural ceremony.

110. (C) Comment Continued: Whatever progress Obasanjo and Mbeki made in early May appears to have been undone by the events of late May/early June. From our reading of Obasanjo's account of his visit, Mugabe seemed more interested in making serial demands that would retard progress than in actually moving forward to an accommodation with the MDC. Perhaps, Mugabe's less than familial reception in Abuja may also signal that Nigeria is losing patience with him. During the Ambassador's next meeting with the President, we will seek his views on the recent turn of events in Zimbabwe and what he sees as next steps. END COMMENT.
JETER